



Reconstruction of Identities in Hamid's 'Exit West': Pakistani Women in Transition

Aisha Saleem, Lecturer in English, Center for English Language, University of Central Punjab Lahore Pakistan, aisha.saleem@ucp.edu.pk

Dr Musarat Yasmeen, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Gujrat Pakistan, musarat.yasmeen@uog.edu.pk

Rabia Batool, Lecturer in English, Center for English Language, University of Central Punjab Lahore Pakistan, rabia.batool@ucp.edu.pk

Dr Tahir Saleem, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Central Punjab Lahore Pakistan, tahir.saleem@ucp.edu.pk

Abstract- The present study focuses on investigating the transition in females' sexual and gender roles as well as in their language use (assertive, unmitigated, and direct) in Pakistani society with the help of Hamid's (2017) wonderful novel 'Exit West', which was listed for Man's Booker Prize award. This research, therefore, analyzes the discourse of the novel keeping in view the cultural-shift in Pakistan about female transition, fluidity, the reappraisal of sexuality and language with the application of postmodern feminist theory proposed by Butler(1991,1996), who believes that gender and language are performative. The study's data analysis concludes that Pakistani women are reshaping their identities, roles, positions, responsibilities, sexuality, and language. They are in the process of transition, fluidity, and cultural-shift through the main female protagonist of the novel. The study, highly recommends to the future researchers to research this area; language, sexuality, and gender, the relationship among these factors in reshaping the roles and identities of modern Pakistani women and the cultural-shift as most of the women are entering show-biz, games as a wrestler, footballer -cricketers, jobs, going abroad for higher studies, in the public sphere as writers and many other fields of life.

Keywords: transition, gender, language, performativity, fluidity

I. INTRODUCTION

During the last few decades, females all over the world are putting great efforts to confirm that they are not submissive, meek, and docile but they are active, confident, and dynamic and participating in all fields of life whether it is a matter of getting higher education or going abroad (Alman, 2004). In the past, they were not allowed to come out from their private life of home and children but with the awakening of the feminist movement, the women have started to take part in the public sphere of men as a writer, lawyer, mathematician, TV anchor, and doctor (Spender, 1981). With their arrival in the public sphere, they became a threat to the males as Rich (1972) points out that he has read a piece of poetry written by a male poet and felt a deep pessimism and fatalistic grief. He is of the view that he is wondered if it is the masculine side of what women have experienced and it is the price of male dominance. He is hopeful that females no longer be primarily mothers and muses for men.

Rich's (1972) idea is getting true and accurate as females are no more mothers, wives, and daughters only rather they are breaking the boundaries and doing struggle to construct self-defined images. They are in the process of transforming the man-made marginality imposed on them and ascribed them as irrational and illogical (Spender, 1981). Women were considered passive and sexually submissive whereas men were active and dominating in the relation of man-woman (Spender, 1981). In the 21st century, due to the spread of *globalization* and *tabloidization* women's roles are shifted from fixed-binary relation to transient, a reappraisal of sexuality and gender that takes towards the construction of new identities and 'cultural turn' (Richardson, 2007).

This 'cultural turn' has changed the function and position of women worldwide and they are entering the areas that had been fields of men previously as police-officer, bureaucrat, lawyer, administrator, and banker. They are more dynamic and their language has also been extended from non-assertive to assertive and forceful (Ostermann, 2003).

They are determined to build their self-defined images and have not confined themselves to the fixed binary-relation of male or female, to a certain extent they are accepted based on performative identity, the idea proposed by Judith Butler (1990, 1996), the postmodern writer who has been inspired from Derrida's theory of deconstruction and negates the stereotypical roles assigned to male and female. She believes that identity is not fixed and constant but is unnatural and formed by diverse cross-cultural interaction and social influences.

Pakistani women like many other women in the world are not spared from this cultural-shift and they are also constructing their new identities based on their language, gender, and sexual performativity that are fluid, hybrid, and evolving constantly. In the past, Pakistani women were represented as under-privileged, less-meaningful, and irrational in Pakistani Urdu as well as English fiction even in the works of the 20th century, the Pakistani women's character has been represented as the extension of male's character and highlighted in the famous work of Bapsi Sidhwa (1983) '*The Pakistani Bride*'. Many other writers have depicted Pakistani women stereotypically as docile, subjugated, and dominated by male but many Pakistani post-colonial and postmodern writers (Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsi, Abdul Hamid, and Adam Nayyer) have transferred their writing from stereotypical to advance the theme that is influenced by the change in the society and new identities.

Many Pakistani fiction writers have written about this shift in culture and society but their works have highlighted this transfer in the life of females who belong to high-class and urban areas of the country (Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad) and they are well-educated or they are under the influence of Western culture as they studied abroad (S. Muhammad, 2018). According to him, the elite-class Pakistani women do not accept the taboos being attributed to them even though they belong to Muslim-families and prefer to lead a life gratis from any boundaries similar to males in Pakistani society. Mohsin Hamid is an eminent Pakistani English novel writer and he has won many international awards for his affective writing because he depicts the picture of Pakistani culture evidently with the themes of identity crises, global war, the issue of militants, terrorism, binary relationships of male and female which offers new insights of fluidity and changeability in their traditional roles.

The present study focuses on investigating the transition in females' sexual and gender roles as well as their language use (assertive, unmitigated, and direct) in Pakistani society with the help of Hamid's (2017) wonderful novel '*Exit West*', which was listed for *Man's Booker Prize award*. The research seeks to find out answers to these questions (1) what are the discursive patterns used to create fluidity and transient identities in the female protagonist of the novel? (2) which are the concepts for the expression of these transient identities and do they have a resemblance with the real-life Pakistani women's social roles? These are the concerns and questions, which propose a gap in the offered literature in the Pakistani context and that cause the initiative of this research.

This research, therefore, analyzes the discourse of the novel keeping in view the cultural-shift in Pakistan about female transition, fluidity, the reappraisal of sexuality and language with the application of postmodern feminist theory proposed by Butler (1991, 1996), who believes that gender and language are performative. She opposes the idea that hedges, indirect commands, and tag questions are language properties of females (Lakoff, 1975) rather she proposes that language use is not fixed for one particular gender rather its evolutionary and can be used by both males and females in particular context and situation. Females in Pakistan are also not playing traditional and stereotypical roles in a patriarchal society of males, although, all the women of Pakistan are not experiencing this liberty except highly-educated, urban and middle-class females.

II. GENDER TRANSITION AND FLUIDITY IN IDENTITY THROUGH PERFORMATIVITY

Hamid's (2017) novel 'The Exit West', offers an insight of bold orientation of transition in sexuality and gender through the female protagonist of the novel, Nadia who belongs to a middle-class, very religious-Muslim family, "The art in Nadia's childhood home consisted of religious verses and photos of holy sites, framed and mounted on walls" (Hamid, 2017), lives in an urban area of Pakistan (Lahore) and is discontented with the life spending with her family. Like many modern women of the country (Pakistan), she wants to lead a life free from all the taboos, religious-restrictions, cultural- boundaries, and under the influence of mass-media; she decides to leave her parents' home and family as the novel describes the intensity of the situation;

"...after finishing university Nadia announced, to her family's utter horror, and her surprise for she had not planned to say it, that she was moving out on her own, an unmarried woman, the break involved hard words on all sides..."

Nadia as a Muslim-girl decides to leave home on her own points out the change and transition in Pakistani women's thinking and their consciousness to break the boundaries although culture, society, family, and religion do not allow her to do so but she does not care for all these factors and leaves home like a male in the society of Pakistan who can afford offenses because he is the norm-producer. Aijaz Ahmed (1994) in his wonderful work has also shed light on the role of Pakistani women as they are not actively part of family politics and reproduction of young ones but they are attaining education and realizing their roles for the progress of their nation. After leaving home, she joins an insurance company and uses her vehicle (motorcycle) for transportation as;

"He watched as she walked out to the parking area and there, instead of covering her head with a black cloth, as he expected, she donned a black motorcycle helmet that had been locked to a scuffed-up hundred-ish cc trail bike, snapped down her visor, straddled her ride, and rode off, disappearing with a controlled rumble into the gathering dusk".

She turns the role of female ascribed to a woman in a society (like Pakistan) and acts as a male in a developing country where females are not even allowed to leave their homes without *hijab* or *dupatta* but she wears a helmet, "rode off and rumble into dusk", symbolizes the transition in females' roles in culture and reminds about a female (Zenith Irfan) in Pakistan who rode her bike for 3200 km in Pakistan and broke the patriarchy of male in the society. Nadia does not play the role of the males only but she feels pleasure to talk like them about sex and sexuality openly, "So men don't fuck with me," she said (Hamid, 2017). These words symbolize her boldness and bluntness which is mostly expected from Western-women because they are liberal and their talk is free from shyness, hesitation, and coyness but such use of expression from a Muslim-girl and Pakistani women depicts the deconstruction of social roles and cultural identity that is discussed by Butler (1991) as sexual performativity.

After leaving her home, Nadia starts living in a house of the widow on rent and gets the widow's sympathy by telling her a false story that she is also a widow and her husband has died in a battle. She does not bother to sustain the role being assigned to her by Muslim culture and society as a woman who is supposed to preserve her purity and chastity as an unmarried woman but she affords illegitimate sexual relations with males without having *nikah* with them.

Like males of the society in Pakistan or all over the World, she invites Saeed (the main male character of the novel) at her home and takes him in her room on the sly as;

"The bag landed beside Saeed with a muffled thump. He opened it, found her spare downstairs key, and also one of her black robes, which he furtively pulled on over his own outfit..."

These words describe the transition of identity in both characters, as a female in Pakistan, it is not believed to take such bold steps to invite a male at her home without wedlock and male as a norm-maker and a symbol of manliness and power is not expected to wear a female's robe as a feminine act. Saeed prefers to play the role of a subordinate that indicates the male's status in Pakistani society as many men are accepting the hard reality that females are no more inferior and subordinate rather they are fulfilling the needs of their partners as well as doing public work as a writer, doctor and an engineer. His act of wearing a female robe and entering the home like a coward gives hope to Spender's (1981) words when she says that females will

no more be poorer and musses. Nadia breaks the cultural norms and takes the dominancy in sexual exercise and resist leading a married life free from boundaries as a wife and mother, even her name 'Nadia', without any sir-name indicates her freedom and cultural-shift as no father's name or husband's name is attached to it. Lakoff (2004) in her famous book writes that the female all over the world have no identity without the role of a male in her life, a female rely on a male as a father, brother or a husband. If she does not have these relations she can't sustain any position in the cruel world but in the case of Nadia's role, it is not true as she decides to construct her new and independent identity without any support from her father or husband. She is ready to break the shackles;

"She had shuffled off the weight of her virginity with some perplexity but not excessive fuss...and the sex they had was passionate farewell sex, and it was, not unsurprisingly, surprisingly good".

As a modern woman who belongs to a middle-class family, Nadia violates the laws of society for the fulfillment of her personal desire without keeping in mind the circumstances she can face in the future but invites Saeed frequently at her home to get pleasure from his company and even decides to leave the country with him without having the married relationship and sometimes as a male gets aggravated from his companionship. She does not get married to any male of the society and lead a life as a single woman, "Nadia said imagine how different life would be if I had agreed to marry you" (Hamid.2017).She uttered these words when she meets Saeed after many years and hints at the idea that she deconstructs her role as a female who can enjoy liberty, afford sexual relations without wedlock and pursue a job in a developing country (Pakistan) also.

At this point, the study disagrees with S. Muhammad (2018), he concluded his study that high-class women who visited abroad for getting higher education are breaking the cultural-boundaries and have transition and sexual-fluidity in their identity because of hybrid-cultural influences but this study presents the case of a Muslim-girl who belongs to a middle-class, highly religious family, "Nadia's mother and sister were quiet women and her father a man who tried to be quiet, thinking this a virtue" (Hamid,2017), a family and culture,who has no exposure to Western culture in a great deal except a little access to mass-media. She is not allowed to even talk for her rights or argue against the words of her father and mother. She and her sister are supposed to be inaudible to show their obedience towards their parents and preserve the Muslim culture by doing so but she deconstructs her role and represents the majority of the women in the society (Pakistan) as a large number of people in Pakistan belong to the middle-class and are responsible to preserve the traditions, cultures, values, and religious-norms.

III. LANGUAGE TRANSITION AND PERFORMATIVITY

Hamid has presented a picture of the culture and society (Pakistan) where females are reshaping their identities and denying the natural rules of the society because society has made them natural and unbreakable but the main female character of the novel, Nadia represents the modern woman who differs from Lakoff's (1975) idea that women are uncertain about their language and use hedges, polite markers, tag questions, and indirect language. Nadia's character also defies West's (1987) finding that female doctors use mitigated language whereas male doctors use direct commends to have control over the situation. Nadia's language supports the idea put forwarded by Butler (1990) that language isperformative, fluid, and transient.The first time in the novel, when she has an introductory interaction with Saeed, she bluntly and directly answers him at the question of offering prayer; "She interrupted him. "I don't pray," she said" (Hamid, 2017). Without any use of hedges in her conversation or being uncertain about the situation, she answers straightforwardly whereas the same question is answered by Saeed in a mitigated manner,"I think it's personal. Each of us has his own way.Or . . . her own way. Nobody's perfect. And, in any case..." (Hamid, 2017), with the help of long pauses and uncertainty about how to answer the question and maintain the politeness which is a language trait of women. Saeed negates Johnson's (1997) idea that the man talks directly to prove his masculinity without indecision.

On some other occasion, she again negates the idea of women's language as more polite and indirect (Tannen, 1999). Saeed while staying in America tries to peruse her like a woman to have a good and close relationship with the people who also belong to Pakistan, a sentimental and nostalgic proposal similar to a

women's idea and is not expected from a man who belongs to a society and culture where such proposals cannot be anticipated from a male who is a symbol of manliness and vigor. He proposes her;

"They're not like me. You haven't met them. Nadia replied, "I don't need to" (Hamid,2017).

Nadia's use of direct language and linguistic forms symbolize her confidence, self-superiority, and the transition in her character and language as she openly denies meeting the people she does have acquaintance with and social relations. Tannen. D (2001) concluded her article on mixed-gender talk that the females don't answer directly in many situations where their copartners sought the answers to questions about different situations but the protagonist of the novel is determined to have a standing in the modern society without any fear and fright whereas Saeed's words, 'they are not like me', His self-confession and realization hint that he is a Pakistani traditional-male but the males live in America are not as authoritative as he is, represents the cultural-turn in male's role as Butler (1991) proposed. He candidly accepts the shift in the role and does not hesitate to allow Nadia to have interaction with males to show social communication.

Hamid (2017) successfully represents an educated woman and modern women of the contemporary society who was under-represented in an ill-mannered way in the past or history because history, drama, poetry, and print media was under the control of the male and even female-writers constructed such female characters to please the male (Spender, 1981) but Hamid (2017) as a post-modern writer presents a Pakistani woman who is in transition and rejects the hard and fast rules of the society and cultural-limits through the character of Nadia.

"Nadia was seized by a wild fury but then as she looked at Saeed he appeared almost lethally mortified and a coil loosened in her and she smiled a little and she held him tight, to torture him and to test him, and she said, surprising herself, "It's okay. We can see" (Hamid, 2017).

In the above-given situation, Nadia holds him tight to test him and torture him shows her superiority over him as she does not hold him tightly to remove her fear or terror as in most situations females hold their husbands or a child-girl holds her father tightly in the panic and fearful situation that shows their inferiority, meekness and a reliance on the male but here Nadia holds him to torture him. The words uttered by her also depict confidence and self-belief and the expression is mostly used by males as 'it's okay' because females do not get satisfied easily and in most cases rely on detailed explanations. The use of this pithy term portrays fluidity and change in modern woman's language that is not based on irrelevant details and prolonged gossips.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study's data analysis based on Butler's (1991) idea concludes that Pakistani women are reshaping their identities, roles, positions, responsibilities, sexuality, and language. They are in the process of transition, fluidity, and cultural-shift through the main female protagonist of the novel. Although it is a fictional representation and not representing all Pakistani women, it is a bold plunge taken by a Pakistani writer (Hamid, 2017) to present a woman who belongs to a middle-class family and stands for the majority of the Pakistani women.

This study is an innovative contribution in the field of language and gender because it does not talk only about female's gender and sexual transition of upper-class women but highlights the fluidity and change in Pakistan's majority representation (middle-class women) and their language transforms through the analysis of discursive patterns whereas most of the previous works shed light on the characters and life of the women who belonged to elite-class, studied abroad, had global exposure and focused on gender and sexuality (S. Muhammad, 2018, Sayeed,2017, Raza, 2016).

The study, highly recommends to the future researchers to research this area; language, sexuality, and gender, the relationship among these factors in reshaping the roles and identities of modern Pakistani women and the cultural-shift as most of the women are entering show-biz, games as a footballer –cricketers, jobs, going abroad for higher studies, writers as newspaper Colum and many other fields of life. This study

has tried to initiate a studious discourse on transition and fluidity in female sexuality, gender, and language that is prevalent all over the world.

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